Angel Kwolek-Folland

Women and Vernacular Gendered Buildings and Sites

People bring a wide variety of backgrounds and expectations with them as they visit historic buildings or sites. As a tourist gawking at elegant mansions, large plantations, reconstructed mills, or living farms, I have been pleased by the presence and disappointed by the absence of women's experience in preservation choices. I find women's lives fascinating; and I want to know more about their history as lived in particular places, particular buildings. At a place like Mt. Vernon, visitors find the kitchens as compelling as the desk where George Washington composed his letters. Perhaps one reason for our positive response to the ordinary is that most of us have cooked an egg, but almost none of us has ever led a country. There is something about the commonness of everyday life that makes history vivid, personal, and illuminating in ways the larger affairs of the world cannot. For much of our history, most women's lives have been led in seemingly "common" or private spaces, among small and intimate things. Much of women's lives have been "vernacular"; specific to time and place, localized, and routine rather than spectacular or unique.

For this reason, focusing on the architectural and landscape expressions of ordinary people provides an excellent window to the commonalities and differences of historical experiences. Vernacular buildings and sites uniquely reveal most people's lives. Often overlooked as historically unimportant, ordinary buildings and sites can provide exciting opportunities for glimpsing something about the history of ordinary women and men. In addition, women's lives can help us understand vernacular places and structures and expand our sense of the historically important. The way gender shapes buildings and sites, both in the past and the present, is important to accurate historical presentation, to engaging public interest, and to making informed preservation choices.

Many assumptions about gender (some of them unexamined) shape preservation decisions and approaches to vernacular buildings and sites. For example, in preserving, displaying, and analyzing the physical environments of women's lives, we usually assume that there is a split between public and private worlds, the "separate spheres" of men and women. So we tend to associate women's historical experience with various types of domestic space. We often associate houses with activities, attitudes, and values removed from "public" considerations. And we define the arena of women's economic activities as outside the home, in public workplaces such as a textile mill. It is easy to overlook domestic spaces of residential areas as arenas of economic production, or public places as stages for private life. This tendency to separate domestic, private places and activities from public, economic, or political places and activities is further complicated by the difficulty of viewing places like neighborhoods as integrated wholes. We tend to focus on discrete farmsteads, houses, or workplaces. Finally, sometimes we overlook the fact that gender is one among several "social categories" to which we all belong. Race, ethnicity, and class also are part of our historical, personal, and social identifies. All built spaces and sites are racially, ethnically, and culturally heterogeneous as well as gendered.

Clearly, gender is a complicated set of relationships rather than a static category. To make it more useful, we can break it down into at least three component parts, listed here in no particular order although the parts are related to one another. These pieces are useful for sorting out the gendered dimensions of vernacular buildings and sites, and for making gender a part of their preservation and presentation as historic places. Together they comprise the most important variables in the "gendering" of buildings and sites.

First, gender is a "structural" category. This means that law, culture, social expectations, and rituals all have a gendered dimension, which often also contains class, ethnic, or racial elements. For example, in most of the 19th century, a married woman had no legal right to her own earnings. They were her husband's property, just as she was. In the 20th century, we still express this sort of patriarchal notion when a bride's father "gives her away" to the groom, thus passing paternal rights onto the son-in-law. Sometimes, gendered expressions seem to have a certain timeless quality. We often associate women with interior domestic space and men with lawn mowing and car repairs. This version of "separate spheres" is rooted in our expectations about the gendered dimension of class and race that goes back to the mid-18th century and to the development of a capitalist market economy—long before the exis-

tence of lawns, mowers, or cars. This apparent timelessness, however, actually masks historical variation and important incremental changes often expressed in architectural form. For example, the classic distinction between "shanty" and "lace curtain" Irish Americans grounds notions of domesticity, gender, ethnicity, and class in the metaphor of housing styles.

Second, gender is a "fragmented" category, and fragmented in numerous ways. Gender depends on cultural approaches to the division of maleness and femaleness, ethnicity, race, and class. For example, in the Hispanic southwest, men typically make adobe bricks, but women construct and repair adobe structures. The process of building with adobe thus reinforces the mutual interdependence of men and women typical of Hispanic culture. Gender also is fragmented over time, with the structure of gendered relations changing constantly. Gender is further fragmented between the ideals about behavior and relations, and the reality of how people actually behave and relate. To use the "separate spheres" example again, the ideal of domestic women and lawn-mowing men is much more complex in the lived world. One recent Saturday afternoon, I found myself in our driveway replacing a headlight in the Chevy. At the same time, a neighbor woman to the east was mowing her lawn, while another on the west was trimming the trees in her yard. Many complex individual decisions went into this gender-bending behavior. But clearly, knowing the ideal for gender relations at a particular time will not always tell you how people actually behave.

Finally, gender is an "experiential" category, both a private understanding of who we are as gendered people and a public "performance" of our maleness and femaleness, our class position, our ethnicity, and our racial identity. In fact, the way gender combines the personal and the public gives it a particular force in historical re-creation. Buildings and sites are like "stages" where people act out complex plays about family, religion, attitudes about work—or the intricacies of social rituals like courting. In a historic site such as Mount Vernon, the social and ritual stage-setting is obvious. The complex of buildings, gardens, forests, fields, and waterways that comprise this plantation physically structured the social relations of a slave society based on race, gender, and class distinctions. However, all built forms and sites share this function even as they send different messages. A vernacular bungalow or a front yard filled with plastic deer and plaster elves is made for the edification and enjoyment of those driving by in automobiles. An African-American-swept yard in Georgia, with its tire planters, work tables, and hog butchering hoist, is designed as a neighborly gathering place and work site. Both structure social relations.

The structural, ideological, and social differences men and women have available to them mean women and men may construct and experience buildings and sites differently. The same place can, literally, be several different worlds criss-crossed by gender, race, ethnicity, or class experience and meaning. Untangling this diversity can enrich the historic presentation of a site and render even the most "average" vernacular building a potentially broad historical canvas.

The complexity of concerns intrinsic to women's history further suggests that buildings and sites must be carefully integrated into their larger context. My ideal historic site would be an entire 19th-century residential neighborhood, envisioned not just as a collection of homes or domestic spaces, but as a complex of locations for public social activities and economic enterprise as well as domestic lives. Women raised chickens in their yards and sold eggs, took in sewing or boarders to support themselves and their children, or ran a neighborhood laundry in their sideyards. The solitary example of a large and well-designed vernacular residence is a useful historic document. More useful, however, would be the complex of outbuildings, dirt lanes, tree swings, churches, and grocery stores that together made up a social and economic world.

Historically, women's lives are both ordinary, in the vernacular sense of common and locally-specific, and part of a much larger social and cultural world of patriarchy, racial hierarchies, ethnic differences, and class stratification. The specificity and very ordinariness of most women's lives throughout history can bring an immediate and visceral reality to such broad historical themes. The preservation and presentation of vernacular buildings and sites would be infinitely enriched by incorporating the many histories of women.

Angel Kwolek-Folland is Associate Professor, Department of History, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas.